



Dialogue and the Good: Fingers Pointing at the Moon?

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Accepted: 25 September 2023 / Published online: 18 October 2023
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Abstract

Educators, philosophers, and commentators in the popular media often assume that students and adult citizens alike should engage in dialogue regarding ethical, social, and political issues, particularly with people who hold different views. Debates about the value of such dialogue tend to focus on the political implications of these exchanges and neglect the ontological and epistemological assumptions that could make sense of why people should talk their way to greater understanding. This focus on the political implications of dialogue also obscures conceptions of personhood that could call into question the relationship between dialogue and understanding. Drawing on conceptual resources available in the work of Charles Taylor, this article argues that ethical insight may best be cultivated when dialogue is interdependent with a quieting of the linguistic, conceptual mind. Taylor insists that articulation is indispensable to moral orientation. However for Taylor, rather than merely identifying or entirely constructing the good, language “grants access” to the good. This suggests that language is a vehicle for sources that exist outside of articulation. Education meant to cultivate students’ capacity for judgment in discussions of ethical, social, and political issues might then be enhanced through practices that reserve space for that which lies outside of language. In particular, educators could cultivate students’ capacity to produce reasons through dialogue not in isolation but in relationship to students’ receptivity to non-verbal insight.

Keywords Charles Taylor · Dialogue · Mindfulness · Listening

It is like when someone points his finger at the moon to show it to someone else. Guided by the finger, that person should see the moon. If he looks at the finger instead and mistakes it for the moon, he loses not only the moon but the finger also. Why? It is because he mistakes the pointing finger for the bright moon.¹

According to Charles Taylor, “the great challenge of this century, both for politics and for social science, is that of understanding the other.”² This is a sweeping statement from

¹ The Buddhist Text Translation Society (Translated from Chinese), “Sutra of the Foremost Shurangama at the Buddha’s Summit Concerning the Tathgata’s Secret Cause of Cultivation, His Certification to the Complete Meaning and all Bodhisattvas’ Myriad Practices.”.

² Taylor, Charles, “Understanding the other: A Gadamerian view on conceptual schemes.” In *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011: 24–38.

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a philosopher who has traced some of the monumental dilemmas not only of our time but also of preceding eras. And Taylor has a wide range of contemporaries who agree with him. Many educators, as well as scholars, pundits, and everyday people assume that it is good to engage in understanding-oriented conversations with people different from ourselves. Educators often structure classroom discussions to encourage students to engage with ideas that conflict with their own, especially in regard to ethical, social, and political issues.³ Similarly a multitude of programs now facilitate inter-religious dialogue or bring together people who hold opposing political views.⁴ Dialogue with people with whom we disagree is in many cases presumed to be desirable for students and adult citizens alike.

Yet it is worth asking of any recommended practice what underlying conceptions of personhood commend it and at the same time, what conceptions of the person might call the practice into question. This is particularly so when the practice is both lauded and controversial. For while dialogue across ideological divides has its flood of supporters, they are matched by a torrent of opposition. Critics argue that expecting people who disagree to engage in civil discourse, particularly about political issues, wrongly displaces focus on systemic injustice to interpersonal relationships and asks people who are oppressed to pour their energy into polite talk rather than resistance.⁵ In its recent series on the topic in the United States, National Public Radio dubbed this debate the “civility wars.”⁶ Yet while these debates about the political consequences of dialogue are important, they tend to obfuscate the deeper pictures of human life that support or undermine the idea that dialogue is worthwhile.

This article aims, first, to examine what conception of personhood and insight makes dialogue an epistemic and ethical good. To do so I draw on conceptual resources available in disparate parts of the philosopher Charles Taylor’s work. These conceptual resources are rooted in different aspects of Taylor’s theory of the role of language in the creation of meaning, his epistemology related to the nature of subjective experience in ethical insight, and his understanding of moral identity. These ideas about language, subjectivity, insight, and moral identity illuminate why one might accept the claim that dialogue across deep differences is beneficial.

Second, the article argues that grounding dialogue in a particular conception of the person can also reveal the limits of articulation and therefore the limits of dialogue. I draw on Taylor’s moral ontology to show how his ideas point to goods that dialogue may in fact obscure but which Taylor does not himself identify. While Taylor focuses on a defense of articulation regarding insight into the good, I argue that a focus on verbalization and representation alone can also obscure ethical insight.

This analysis can lend nuance and clarity to contentious public as well as scholarly debates about the value of dialogue. Arguments about the political consequences of civic discourse tend to remain fixated on the divide between those who view human relations as

³ See for example Parker, Walter (2010). Listening to strangers: Classroom discussion in democratic education. *Teachers College Record*, 112(11), 2815–2832. Retrieved from <http://www.tcrecord.org.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/library/content.asp?contentid=15794>; Hess DE and McAvoy P (2014) *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*. New York: Routledge.

⁴ See for example organizations such as Better Angels (<https://www.better-angels.org/>); Crossing Party Lines (<http://www.crossingpartylines.net/>); Interfaith Dialogue Project (<https://www.peaceheals.org/>); Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center (<https://www.peaceheals.org/>).

⁵ See for example Sanders, Lynn M. "Against deliberation." *Political theory* 25, no. 3 (1997): 347–376; Mouffe, Chantal. "Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism?." *Social research* (1999): 745–758. For an example from the popular press, see Leonard, Sarah. 2018. Against Civility. *The Nation Magazine*.

⁶ National Public Radio, “The Civility Wars” <https://www.npr.org/series/702738248/civility-wars>

defined by power (and who dismiss dialogue) and those who see a greater scope for rationality (and who support dialogue). What both arguments neglect is the dimension of human experience that concerns neither power nor rational articulation: the role of silence and receptivity in insight. This I suggest is especially important in order to cultivate perception that does not merely repeat the cultural scripts to which students (and people in general) have grown accustomed.

Finally, I argue that the elucidation of a moral ontology that supports dialogue can clarify how discourse about ethical, social, and political issues can be supported in educational settings. Yet by illuminating the goods to which dialogue *cannot* grant access according to the framework suggested by Taylor's work, this elucidation can also inform educational practices that address those limitations.

Throughout this argument, I do not draw a sharp distinction between the many different kinds of dialogue, but rather refer to the myriad forms of understanding-oriented conversation across ethical, social, and political divides. For example, these conversations are referred to as "deliberation" when the discussion precedes a political decision and includes the exchange of reasons regarding that decision or concerns argumentation regarding a political principle. Dialogue has been classified as "hermeneutical" when the focus is on understanding the person who holds a differing view rather than on the facts of the issue itself, or "critical" when based in the work of theorists such as Paolo Freire and aimed at uncovering forms of injustice.⁷ The author's previous research suggests that so many conversations across ideological divides necessarily involve all of these elements, as argumentation regarding decisions, facts and principles, attempts to understand the person who holds opposing views, and attention to conditions of injustice all contribute to robust discussion. The argument that follows therefore is not limited to a particular type of dialogue but rather concerns any conversation in which interlocuters have different conceptions of what is good and aim to address this difference through talk. This could include a social studies class discussing affirmative action, a philosophy class contemplating the educational system of Plato's *Republic*, a conversation that brings together people of different religions or one that brings together people with opposing political views. I refer to these exchanges with the broad term "dialogue," acknowledging that elements of deliberation as well as of multiple forms of dialogue may be included.

In what follows, I first draw on diverse works by Taylor to elucidate his conception of human personhood and its relationship to language. I then turn to how Taylor's work, though explicitly focused on the importance of articulation for selfhood, also contains resources for understanding articulation as a necessary but insufficient aspect of insight. Next, I turn to how Taylor's own tradition as well as how traditions outside the West have understood and enacted the value of non-discursive practices. I subsequently explore the role of dialogue in relation to these non-discursive practices. Finally, I discuss the challenges of incorporating such practices in schools and provide examples of how this might be accomplished.

⁷ Burbules, Nicholas C. "The limits of dialogue as a critical pedagogy." *Revolutionary pedagogies: Cultural politics, education, and the discourse of theory*, 2000. 251–273.

The Dialogic and Good-Seeking Self: Taylor's Ontology

In his recent book, *The Language Animal*,⁸ Taylor theorizes language as a vehicle for meaning. On its surface, this position seems uncontroversial: the idea of the social construction of human experience has become widely accepted within and outside the academy in diverse fields. The idea that language helps to construct the concepts it names is embedded in a long intellectual tradition which Taylor discusses. But Taylor's position is subtle: While he rejects earlier theories of language as simply identifying or "encoding" the world, his view differs from a straightforward conception of social construction. Language gives shape to meaning for Taylor, but sources of meaning may exist outside of the language that makes these sources accessible to us. Like some Hindu conceptions of the many faces of God allowing humans conceptual and sensory access to a more abstract being, language gives meaning form.

In his earlier work, this conception of the role of language is connected specifically to ethical formation. This is especially evident in *Sources of the Self*,⁹ in which Taylor roots our sense of self in our moral orientation and grounds our access to this orientation in articulation. Taylor thinks of articulation in a broad sense, including not only interlocution but also engagement with texts, stories and images. What matters for Taylor is that all of these forms can make visible inchoate notions of what is true and good that tacitly shape our horizons, so that we may see, affirm, revise or reject those notions. This book as well as the later *Secular Age*¹⁰ can for this reason be understood as projects of excavation. Taylor painstakingly traces the ethics that have been formative throughout the history of classical and modern Western thought and the imaginaries or background pictures of the world and human life that support those ethics.

The point of Taylor's intellectual history therefore is articulation for the sake of our own ethics. Uncovering and illuminating the sources of meaning that inspired previous eras, Taylor suggests, can broaden the ethical possibilities available to us as well as clarify our own ethical traditions by revealing what makes them distinct. Identifying the ideas embedded in history is complementary with other forms of articulation for Taylor, including reading narratives in religious texts as well as dialogue between contemporaries. In any of these different forms, articulation matters because "A vision of the good becomes available for the people of a given culture through being given expression in some manner."¹¹

Indeed, Taylor stresses repeatedly that the cultivation of ethical life depends upon expression, particularly in words. For Taylor, it is not only that "articulation can bring us closer to the good as a moral sense, can give it power."¹² More strikingly for Taylor, without articulation we would not have access to the good at all, as "The goods I have been talking about only exist for us through some articulation"¹³ because, "articulation is a necessary condition of adhesion [to a good]; without it, these goods are not even options."¹⁴

The danger of contemporary society, Taylor suggests, is the inarticulacy of ethical concepts. He laments that much of modern moral philosophy either sidelines ethical questions

⁸ Taylor, Charles. *The language animal*. Harvard University Press, 2016.

⁹ Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Harvard University Press, 1989.

¹⁰ Taylor, Charles. *A secular age*. Harvard University Press, 2007.

¹¹ Taylor, Sources of the self, 91.

¹² Taylor, Sources of the self, 92.

¹³ Taylor, Sources of the self, 92.

¹⁴ Taylor, Sources of the self, 91.

or narrows them to defining obligatory actions. Obscured by a preoccupation with the right thing to do, contemporary Western liberal thought both within and outside the academy has been less expressive regarding what it is good to be and love.¹⁵ Developing these languages requires not only the articulation of positive theories but also an illumination of different conceptions of ethical life embedded in the past as well as those held by contemporaries with whom we deeply disagree. Conversations across great differences offer a particular opportunity, Taylor suggests, if we approach them in a spirit of openness. The “crucial moment” for Taylor is when “we allow ourselves to be interpellated by the other.”¹⁶ This entails an approach to dialogue wherein “the difference escapes from its categorization as an error, a fault, or a lesser, undeveloped version of what we are.” Instead, we are challenged “to see it as a viable human alternative.”¹⁷

This may seem at first to portray a straightforward picture of the role of dialogue in ethical life. People can recognize the good most clearly when it is articulated. Dialogue across differences can bring to the surface competing notions of the good, to which we can respond with fresh affirmation, modification, or rejection. Yet a close reading of Taylor’s work suggests a more complex relationship between articulation and ethics.

Not by Reason: Or Articulation—Alone

What does a Taylorian ontology of personhood and language offer? For one, this conception of human access to the good as dependent on language provides a basis on which to evaluate arguments in favor of dialogue. Rather than simply claiming that it is good to talk to people with whom we disagree, Taylor’s ontology of ethical development sets a specific stake: our ethical lives depend upon dialogue in some form because goods become visible and therefore affirmable through articulation. Therefore dialogue can be especially valuable with people whose ethical differences may illuminate our own ideals.

Yet this is not the only or even the primary contribution. Liberal traditions premised on the human capacity for rationality¹⁸ and post-liberal theories rooted in the procedural legitimacy of norms established through discourse¹⁹ have after all long provided reasons that we should talk to each other. What Taylor provides is a conception of discourse that reserves space for human access to truth which is not wholly dependent on discourse or the rationality it typically aims to achieve. This is a subtle but significant contribution: on one hand, language gives form to meaning and can therefore move us to affirm or reject an idea of the good. Yet on the other hand, Taylor does not suggest that reasoning through discourse is our only or primary form of access to ethical insight.

¹⁵ Taylor, Charles. “Iris Murdoch and moral philosophy.” In *Dilemmas and connections: Selected essays*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

¹⁶ Taylor, Charles. “Understanding the other: A Gadamerian view of conceptual schemes” In *Dilemmas and connections: Selected essays*. Harvard University Press, 2011: 24–38, p. 37.

¹⁷ Taylor, Understanding the Other, 37.

¹⁸ See for example John Dewey’s pragmatism regarding dialogue, wherein mutual exchange leads to better thinking (e.g. Dewey, John. *Creative democracy: The task before us*. 1939. 227–233. Available at www.fairfield.edu/faculty/hodgson/courses/progress/Dewey.pdf)

¹⁹ Most notable is the discourse ethics articulated by Jurgen Habermas. See for example Habermas, Jürgen. *The theory of communicative action*. Vol. 1. Boston: Beacon press, 1984.

Indeed, Taylor argues that articulation is not “a sufficient condition of belief.”²⁰ The most straightforward reason he offers for the limits of articulation concerns the role of background beliefs. Our sense of the good is embedded in a tacit moral ontology that is unlikely to be unsettled through arguments based in background beliefs that differ from our own.²¹ These background beliefs provide a “picture of our spiritual nature and predicament which makes sense of our responses.”²² Most important in this background picture are what Taylor refers to as “constitutive goods,” which explain or “constitute” the “goodness of our actions”²³ by making sense of why those actions are good. Argumentation alone, Taylor suggests, is unlikely to talk us out of the moral ontology in which we are embedded and in particular the background beliefs that constitute our sense of the good. We must have a larger sense of why it makes sense for something to be good.

Beyond this affirmation of the importance of background beliefs however, there is an implication in Taylor’s work that I suggest is an overlooked but significant contribution and which offers another reason that articulation is not in itself a “sufficient condition of belief.” Words, and the arguments we make with them, do not themselves persuade us to commit to a good that we have not *sensed through other means*. This can be seen in another essential function of constitutive goods: they move us. Beyond simply explaining why something is good, they are “something the love of which empowers us to do and be good.”²⁴

This capacity to be moved is central to Taylor’s ethics. He criticizes the tenor of modern moral philosophy for its preoccupation with what it is right to do. He views virtue theory and related work as improving on this by opening up questions of what it is good to be. But the most important intervention, he believes, came from Iris Murdoch, who called attention to what it is good to love.²⁵ The centrality of love to his ethical sense is pervasive: For Taylor, “The constitutive good does more than just define the content of the moral theory. *Love of it is what empowers us to be good.*”²⁶ The moral theory in itself does not lead to affirmation. It is when we are moved to love it that it comes alive. We may love an idea of reason and therefore strive to live by it, but it is not through reason alone that this striving is borne.

The insufficiency of articulation alone is suggested not only in Taylor’s affirmation of the importance of being moved, moreover, but also in the language he uses to describe what it is that words do. For Taylor’s work suggests that words can reveal a source that is itself beyond the language in which it is embedded or the form of rationality that conceptual language might provide. This view is suggested by how Taylor describes the relationship between language and the good. For Taylor, language “*points to,*”²⁷ and “*brings us into contact with*”²⁸ the good. It does not create, identify, or analyze a source, it “*taps a*

²⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the self*, 91.

²¹ Taylor, *Sources of the self*, 8.

²² Taylor, *Sources of the self*, 8.

²³ Taylor, *Sources of the self*, 92.

²⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the self*, 93.

²⁵ Taylor, Charles. Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy. In *Dilemmas and connections: Selected essays*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

²⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the self*, 93.

²⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the self*, 95.

²⁸ Taylor, *Sources of the self*, 97.

source.”²⁹ These descriptions suggest that language reveals something that exists outside of language, and which has power *through* language but not solely because of it. If language is tapping a source, it is not creating it, and it is not simply identifying it. Language is channeling something.

What can reasoned articulation then accomplish? Taylor far from disregards the human capacity for rationality as a means to access the good; in fact, in “Explanation and Practical Reason,”³⁰ he offers an especially thorough defense of the potential of reasoning against relativist views that suggest that we are each so rooted in our own “encapsulated” traditions that there is no possibility of understanding or persuading each other. Taylor argues in favor of reason in order to carve a space for strong evaluation through dialogue—particularly across cultural differences—against moral relativism.

He appeals not to formal rational criteria, though, but rather to an articulation of the irreducible moral intuitions and background beliefs to which people ascribe. Dialogue for Taylor opens the possibility of showing that an act aligns with or violates these intuitions and beliefs. It is not a matter of arguing a person out of the intuition, then, but of arguing for a new way of translating those intuitions. For Taylor, “The task of reasoning....is not to disprove some radically opposed first premise (e.g., killing people is no problem), but rather to show how the policy is unconscionable on premises which both sides accept, and cannot but accept.”³¹ Both sides “cannot but accept” these premises because they are already embedded in the moral ontology a person holds, which she is not being argued out of but rather made all the more keenly aware of. Indeed, rational argumentation is an excavation of extant beliefs, as “changing someone’s moral view by reasoning is always at the same time increasing his self-clarity and self-understanding.”³²

Therefore for Taylor, reason can show another person that a different application of her own moral intuitions remedies contradictions that she herself recognizes. Reason can also show a person that a different interpretation of her first premises helps to explain the introduction of new information better than her current interpretation. Reason can lead to shifts in perception, then, “for what [reasons] appeal to in the interlocutor’s own commitments is not there, explicit at the outset, but has to be brought to light.”³³ This is an important distinction for Taylor: a new interpretation is not a replacement of a person’s extant commitments. It is a bringing forth of something she understands as already available within her commitments.

This requires a certain openness to alternative explanations, Taylor suggests, but yet it is an openness to alternatives that are grounded in something already shared. Speaking particularly of rational dialogue across cultures, he says that one must become “capable of.... seeing one’s society as one among many possible ones. This is undoubtedly among the most difficult and painful intellectual transitions for human beings.”³⁴ Yet because the aim is not to reason people out of their essential commitments but to reveal to them new ways of viewing the implications of those commitments, this approach is still viewed by some proponents of formal reason as inferior. While “the canonical model of reasoning involves

²⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the self*, 97.

³⁰ Taylor, Charles. “Explanation and practical reason.” In *The scientific enterprise*, pp. 179–201. Springer, Dordrecht, 1992.

³¹ Taylor, *Explanation and practical reason*, 1989, 2.

³² Taylor, *Explanation and practical reason*, 2.

³³ Taylor, *Explanation and practical reason*, 18.

³⁴ Taylor, *Explanation and practical reason*, 21.

maximally breaking us free from our perspective,” Taylor’s model in contrast, “starts from what the interlocutor is already committed to.” Taylor notes of critics of his argument:

For all those whose instinct tells them that the true demands of morality require radical change in the way things are, and the way people have been trained to react to them, starting from the interlocutor’s standpoint seems a formula for conservatism, for stifling at the start all radical criticism, and foreclosing all the really important ethical issues.³⁵

Why for Taylor is it not problematic to leave moral intuitions intact rather than attempt to free people from their extant beliefs? His work suggests that such attempts will not be especially successful, but this is not a sufficient reason for why such an approach is misguided. Rather Taylor’s affirmation of the possibility of reasoning across great cultural distances suggests that he believes that there are some intuitions which people do share, not because they have all come to them through rational argument but because people hold them as intuitions. This is especially evident in Taylor’s writing about modern humanism, wherein he notes that people may scarcely be aware of the moral intuitions that drive them but nonetheless be moved by narratives that bring these intuitions to light.³⁶ Given Taylor’s emphasis on the subjective experience of the good as that which moves us, it seems that these shared intuitions hold status for him as a means to access moral truth. While reason can challenge how we interpret the implications of an intuition and articulation can hone our understanding of an intuition and move us to love what it points us toward, it is the intuition that seems to be the most direct connection to a moral source.

Through what vehicle do people experience these intuitions? As detailed above, Taylor describes articulation as putting us in touch with those intuitions that already resonate. How then might the intuitions themselves arise? Taylor’s personal answer to this question may be grounded in his particular form of contemporary Catholic faith, and hence may involve forms of prayer and contemplation. But he would likely be averse to the idea that moral intuitions must arise from this “encapsulated tradition” alone, given his argument in favor of looking beyond one’s tradition to be “interpellated by the other.”³⁷ Hence one might propose that moral intuitions arise from sources that cannot quite be encapsulated—or named.

The Limits of Articulation

If reasoning in particular and articulation in general make more visible a sense of the good which we already affirm, from where does that pre-articulated sense arise? Within us, Taylor advises:

We should treat our deepest moral instincts...as our mode of access to the world in which ontological claims are discernible and can be rationally argued about and sifted.³⁸

³⁵ Taylor, *Explanation and practical reason*, 6.

³⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the self*, 95.

³⁷ Taylor, “Understanding the other,” 37.
Taylor, *Understanding the Other*, 37.

³⁸ Taylor, *Sources of the self*, 8.

There is a source within us then that constitutes our *mode of access* to the good. That source is not rationality, which we may use to sift claims after they have arisen. Indeed, the erroneous alternative for Taylor is to attempt imitation of the natural sciences through finding objective, rationalized moral claims that are distanced from our capacity for subjective moral responsiveness. Such neutralization does not clarify but in fact undermines our “mode of access” to the good.³⁹

This does not mean that we accept any feeling that arises as moral. It also does not suggest an “emotivist” stance in which something is good simply because we feel it or like it. Not every inward experience is a source of the good. But nonetheless the source of the good is within:

Growth in moral insight often requires that we neutralize some of our reactions. But this is in order that others may be identified, unmixed and unscreened by petty jealousy, egoism, or other unworthy feelings. It is never a question of prescinding from our reactions all together.⁴⁰

If insight regarding the good arises through first-person experience, this still leaves open the question of how such insight arises. Are there practices or conditions that nurture or clarify this sense or is it simply available to everyone at any moment? Might all of these possibilities be the case? Given that Taylor reserves a significant role for a sense of the good that is not created through talk, how does this sense arise?

The mode of rational argumentation within contemporary moral philosophy that Taylor critiques is of course far from the only way that people have attempted to understand what is good. The myriad spiritual traditions that aim to cultivate moral insight are too numerous and complex to review. A quick and superficial list might include prayer, contemplation, meditation, and fasting. Some traditions emphasize extreme experience such as practices of physical deprivation as for example in some Hindu and some Catholic traditions. In the contemporary period for instance, Thomas Merton has provided an exacting description of how prayer, solitude, and physical hardship in his Catholic order cultivate connection to God.⁴¹ Many Buddhist practices in contrast aim not for extreme experience but to nurture insight through a middle path of contemplation in which one cultivates equanimity in relation to both pleasure and suffering.⁴²

While means to care for the soul, or practices that hone our attention to what Taylor calls our “deepest moral instincts” may be as old and varied as human society, what so many share is a sense of the limits of articulation. Texts are important in many if not all of these traditions, but it is typically not through study of the texts alone that one cultivates moral insight. The practices typically involve an experience that occurs in quiet, or in sounds meant to still the conceptual mind such as the Buddhist and Hindu practices of mantra or the chanting of Catholic monks. The shared insight seems to be that the conceptual mind, or the mind that rushes to articulation through ideas, may obscure insight.

This orientation may be most comprehensible within theistic traditions in which there is a clear source outside the self to which one should listen. But it is also evident in non-theistic traditions. In addition to the Buddhist meditative practices mentioned above, Taoist texts express this sensibility, with the Tao te Qing famously beginning:

³⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the self*, 8.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the self*, 8.

⁴¹ Merton, Thomas. *The seven storey mountain*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999.

⁴² See for example a description and interpretation of this tradition in Epstein, M., 2013. *The trauma of everyday life*. Penguin.

The Tao that can be told
 Is not the eternal Tao
 The name that can be named
 Is not the eternal name. The unnamable is the eternally real.⁴³

That these lines open a book of words is not so much of an irony as it may seem. These opening lines remind the reader to return always to something that is wordless. The book, like dialogue, can help to hone, reveal, and move the reader to affirm the wordless insight, but it is the practices of silence that take precedence. Secular knowledge traditions have also recognized this dimension of insight. Anecdotes of scientific geniuses experiencing their greatest breakthroughs not during their periods of focused reasoning but when their mind has quieted, such as while taking a nice hot shower, have given way to research suggesting that periods of receptivity (even including sleep) are pivotal for insight.⁴⁴

It is with this background that one might build on Taylor's claims about our mode of access to the good. For if Taylor's work suggests that moral intuitions arise outside articulation, what lies outside of articulation but a quieting of the talking mind? Furthermore it may be that this quieting is even more elusive than moral articulation. Arguably what is most easily obscured in the contemporary world is not articulation, as Taylor fears, but the quiet in which moral intuitions may be experienced. In other words, while Taylor finds the silence about the good in much of modern moral philosophy "intellectually asphyxiating,"⁴⁵ it is also worth attending to the ways in which over-reliance on articulation may asphyxiate that for which talk is but a vehicle.

The Role of Dialogue

The form of my argument is in keeping with what Taylor proposes reasoning can accomplish: I take Taylor's premises and suggest how they might be better expressed in alternative interpretation and application. Taylor argues that constitutive goods make sense of our life goods. This suggests that our sense of the good is built upon ideas. Yet if we are to take seriously Taylor's argument in support of the subjective experience of the good, we must also make room for direct experience, including direct experience in which intuitions arise that contradict our ideas about what constitutes the good. While Taylor argues that reasons do not unsettle our moral ontology, direct experience through insight may.

For example, a person may be embedded in a moral ontology based on retributive justice. An "eye for an eye" may seem to him the highest good, constituted by a moral ontology of a just God who distributes rewards and punishments according to merit, or of a just State that is punitive and protective depending on what an individual deserves. Articulation may deepen and clarify this ontology in which a person is embedded. In a moment of silence, however, when he has dropped out of conceptual thought, a feeling of compassion may bubble up for someone whom according to his ideas does not deserve it.

⁴³ Laozi, translator Mitchell, Stephen. *Tao te ching*. Harper Perennial, 1989.

⁴⁴ See for example Kounios, John, Jessica I. Fleck, Deborah L. Green, Lisa Payne, Jennifer L. Stevenson, Edward M. Bowden, and Mark Jung-Beeman. "The origins of insight in resting-state brain activity." *Neuropsychologia* 46, no. 1 (2008): 281–291; Wagner, Ullrich, Steffen Gais, Hilde Haider, Rolf Verleger, and Jan Born. "Sleep inspires insight." *Nature* 427, no. 6972 (2004): 352; Clark, Darlene A. "' Sensing' Patient Needs: Exploring Concepts of Nursing Insight and Receptivity Used in Nursing Assessment." *Research and Theory for Nursing Practice* 8, no. 3 (1994): 233.

⁴⁵ Taylor, Sources of the self, 98.

Take another example, this time of how someone might come to the insight that constitutes the current argument: A person might be embedded in a liberal ontology in which the human capacity for reason grants access to truth, and believe that it is through argumentation and the objective distance from our subjective experience that we have the best chance of seeing what is good. Articulation may deepen this sense or convince her of another way of interpreting it. Yet in the quiet, when articulation of these ideas has paused, an insight that she experiences as true may arise, without a formal process of rational argumentation to legitimize it. And she may sense that there is a good in valuing this insight even though it has not arisen through the means that for her conceptually constitute access to the good according to her ontological stance.

It is here that dialogue may play the most crucial role. Beyond moving us to see, affirm, and love those intuitions that spring from our constitutive ideas about the good, dialogue may also help us to recognize the intuitions that arise when ideas are quieted. These insights may contradict previously held ideas, and therefore it is through articulation after their arising in the quiet that we may come to affirm and love them. While a number of theorists have emphasized the importance of listening in dialogue in order to fully understand what others say,⁴⁶ I suggest that quiet is crucial to sensing not only others' ideas but also our own response.

There is a danger though. No intuition can be fully captured through concepts, and we may risk constraining and even deadening the insight through articulation. While words can move us to see, affirm, and love something that conflicts with our prior notions, a frequent return to the silence that made it possible in the first place may be the crucial complement so that the talk does not obscure the good. Rather than Rawls' conception of reflective equilibrium in which we move back and forth between general principals and particular judgments to ensure that our judgments do not violate our stated principals,⁴⁷ I suggest that we continually move between silence and articulation so that we are not so captured by the words that they obscure the intuition. To draw on the Buddhist metaphor that serves as this paper's title, it is helpful to refine the way a finger points at the moon, but this finger should not be mistaken for the moon. If words are not the source of moral truth, then articulation must be balanced by a return to wordlessness for meaning to arise.

Dialogue, Silence, and Education

The first aim of this article has been to articulate a particular set of epistemological and ontological assumptions that make sense of the claim that dialogue across deep differences is a worthwhile practice. Outlining these assumptions can aid evaluation of the desirability of dialogue through attention to whether one agrees with conceptions of the person and of insight that underpin an idea of *why* dialogue is beneficial. Taylor's work is especially useful here in detailing a conception of the person as existing in an inchoate web of meanings that can be clarified, revised, rejected or affirmed—and most importantly, loved—through their articulation. The second aim of the article however has been to argue that Taylor's work also suggests that articulation grants access to sources of insight that exist outside

⁴⁶ Haroutunian-Gordon, S., 2007. Listening and questioning. *Learning Inquiry*, 1(2), pp.143–152; Waks, Leonard J. "Two Types of Interpersonal Listening." *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 11 (2010): 2743–2762; Parker, Walter C. "Listening to strangers: Classroom discussion in democratic education." *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 11 (2010): 2815–2832.

⁴⁷ Rawls, John. *A theory of justice*. Harvard university press, 2009.

of language. Therefore, I have argued that a preoccupation with articulation may actually undermine ethical insight.

In what follows, I will discuss how educators might incorporate practices that quiet the discursive mind and allow for the possibility of other forms of insight. I argue that doing so is no easy task, because it runs against the grain not only of traditional educational practices and assumptions, but also because this approach sits in tension with modern conceptions of personhood on which those educational practices and assumptions are based. However precisely because insight may arise that is not reliant solely on the intentional, discursive, analytical apparatus, I will argue that it is possible to cultivate fertile ground for non-discursive insight even if students and the structures within which they learn are philosophically at odds with such an approach.

The depiction of sources of insight that exist beyond the construction of language sits uneasily with the modern picture of human experience. The modern person, Taylor suggests, imagines and therefore experiences herself as an entity buffered from the world, with clear divisions between what exists inside of her and outside of her. Of course, human beings have always felt, thought, and acted. But a pre-modern person may have experienced herself as “porous,” in that she understood her feelings, thoughts, and actions as springing from sources beyond her, such as spirits good and bad. In the modern imagination, each person is a world unto herself. Desires, thoughts, and feelings originate within her and she in turn acts upon the world outside her, exerting her will in attempt to affect other people and things.⁴⁸

Given this understanding of the person as a buffered, autonomous self from which thoughts and the will arise, it makes sense to see ethical development as rooted in individuals’ conscious construction of concepts which can be honed in dialogue. Like all other human experience, in this picture our ethics arise from within us so we must through our own will define them conceptually. In other words, there is a significant aspect to Taylor’s picture of language and ethics that is embedded in the modern moral order that he describes.

Yet the dimension of Taylor’s framework that I have attempted to draw out is that which is less easily reconciled with this buffered self. If language as Taylor describes “points to,” or “grants access” to ethical sources, then for Taylor language is not entirely constructing those sources. It may be then that quieting the linguistic and therefore the conceptual mind is as essential to ethical insight as the clarification and affirmation of concepts through talk. It is difficult however within the modern moral imaginary to argue for such quieting and the receptivity it engenders. If the shared framework is that of a buffered, meaning-making self, to what source are we being granted access?

This question about the source of insight is especially thorny for educators. This is partly because of the seeming resonance of the question with a longstanding debate over the public schools. This debate often recognizes only two poles: on one pole is an exclusive focus on rational analysis (often referred to as “critical thinking”) such that might be cultivated through the exchange of reasons in discussion. On the other pole is received knowledge, sometimes in the form of a canon of texts or information, or of more concern within public schools, religious belief. In this framing, either educators advance rationalized knowledge practices as they have been understood as arising from the individual student’s intentional mental effort to critique and produce reasons or the classroom is given over to the particularism of unquestioned tradition.

⁴⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

Yet the recognition that articulation is only part of how people gain access to insight does not rely on a clear ontology of the source from which insight arises. Likewise expanding beyond the picture of the rational, reason-producing subject need not identify an alternative source of justification. The point is not that there is a particular source of insight outside dominant conceptions of the self that students must learn to recognize. Rather the aim is a methodology that allows for some degree of freedom in relation to this dominant conception.

Indeed, creating space to pause the reason-producing dimension of human experience may be understood by students and educators variously as tapping that which arises from “the brain” just as they may understand the source as theistic or mysterious in nature. For as discussed above, in addition to the theistic and non-theistic spiritual traditions in which silencing the linguistic, conceptual mind is key to insight, some secular knowledge traditions have also affirmed this approach to insight. Broadening from an exclusive focus on reason-giving approaches to knowledge does not necessarily mean the introduction of particular other beliefs as valid.

What this involves instead is the space for some acknowledgement of ambiguity regarding the source and methods of ethics. Rather than replacing reasons with belief, reasoning might be integrated with practices that encourage receptive forms of reflection. This is particularly important for courses that aim to cultivate students’ capacity for judgment of what is good and right, such as in discussion of ethical, social, and political issues.

In so many such classrooms, students are incentivized to speak and speak often. Participation grades depend upon it. Perhaps thanks in part to scholarship on the importance of listening⁴⁹ as well as to educator’s own judgments, many syllabi such as model rubrics at the author’s own institution also include expectations regarding how well students attend to peers’ contributions.

But neither speaking nor listening leave room for a respite from language and its production. Quiet, when there is nobody outside the student to whom she should listen, is often experienced by teachers and students alike as a failure in discussions. Yet if we are always primed to produce speech or focus attention on another’s speech, there may not be space for insight to arise. Without making claims on the source of insight, we might acknowledge that pausing the productive aspect of our capacity—that which intentionally produces and reacts—may help facilitate access to that to which language points but does not create.

There are different means to incorporate opportunities for pauses in which insight could arise within rational argumentation. While it is beyond the scope of this article to review it here, the growing field of contemplative pedagogy offers many examples.⁵⁰ A recent contribution in this field for instance describes how such approaches were incorporated into a philosophy course on global justice.⁵¹ In addition to traditional methods of reasoned inquiry as well as other meditative practices, one professor regularly engaged students in contemplative reading and viewing. Students were asked to sit with a short passage of text or an image. They were told not to produce an analysis but rather to pay attention to the words or image as well as notice the responses that arose within them as they did so. They might

⁴⁹ See footnote 46.

⁵⁰ See Frank, Jennifer L., Patricia A. Jennings, and Mark T. Greenberg. “Mindfulness-based interventions in school settings: An introduction to the special issue.” *Research in Human Development* 10, no. 3 (2013): 205–210.

⁵¹ Kahane, David. “Learning about obligation, compassion, and global justice.” *Contemplative Learning and Inquiry across Disciplines* (2014): 119.

linger on a phrase or a part of the image they found especially evocative, or read through the whole passage or take in the whole image repeatedly. The point was to attend to the text or picture without rushing to produce an analytic response. Afterward, students write or talk about the experience; they turn to language to illuminate the non-verbal insights that may have arisen.

This example of contemplative reading was part of a course that explicitly aimed to integrate mindfulness practices with the study of global justice. But it is also possible to include such practices within courses that are not structured explicitly around alternative epistemologies. Practices may be designed to deepen engagement with the course content, such as a course on one university's history of race relations wherein students were asked to walk the campus and notice their experience in different spaces as a means of exploring the relationship between architecture, monuments and the experience of inclusion.⁵² While not presented to students as a formal contemplative practice such as walking meditation, this activity nonetheless invited students to tap in to a dimension of their direct experience that might be obscured if they had instead been asked to immediately analyze the inclusiveness of campus architecture from an abstract and conceptual point of view. Other practices can be drawn on in any course, such as leading students on a meditation on breath at the beginning of each class session and then returning to this as it is helpful later in a class session, either in response to student exhaustion or in response to difficult or significant subject matter. To avoid the temptation to use students' immediate responses as evidence of their effort, and to diminish students' need to prove that they have completed the assignment based on their active discussion, these practices can be reserved for in-class assignments that scaffold non-discursive with eventually discursive forms of response. Students might read a passage in class, then be asked to sit for a few moments to allow the passage to settle before formulating a response, and then be given the opportunity to think analytically without performative assessment, such as in writing or with a partner.

In any case, instructors can explain these practices to students without lengthy treatises on epistemology. For example, an instructor might introduce a practice by explaining her desire to allow students to experience course content without the habitual need to produce a response for a grade, or to simply give them a break from their harried and stressful schedules. To assume that students must fully understand the reasons to quiet the discursive mind in order to reap the benefits of such an act presumes that it is the discursive, conceptual mind still at work in the quieting. Instead, the practice of this quieting may work on the students even in the absence of a sophisticated conceptual understanding.

It is telling that critics of mindfulness practices in classrooms have accused educators of two errors. On the one hand, critics argue that mindfulness practices introduce religious content into schools. On the other hand, critics lament on the contrary that mindfulness practices in schools err by evacuating spiritual content for the sake of instrumental goals related to achievement. The former critique assumes that in expanding from an understanding of persons as defined by the capacity to produce conscious reasons through articulation, there must be an alternative (religious) ontology to replace it. The latter critique assumes that even in practices meant to quiet the conceptual, linguistic mind, what matters are the conscious reasons of the educators. It is more difficult to imagine that the practice

⁵² This example was shared by a colleague of the author, but similar walking exercises have been assigned in a variety of courses which differ in their specific content and goals but share the aim of attuning students' attention to the world around them and their experience of it beyond their habitual conceptual faculties.

of quieting the conceptual, linguistic mind may create openings that exceed the conscious and articulated reasons that justify it.⁵³

Yet in the example of the course on global justice, reason was not replaced with belief, and it seems as well that the achievement orientation of the university did not wholly define the practice. In other words, the intentional, reason-producing subject was not exchanged for another source of justification. The professor did not identify from what source within or beyond the student insight would arise when students paused their intentional analysis. Indeed, acknowledging the limits of articulation invites epistemological humility on the part of educators and educational theorists.

Just as acknowledgement of the limits of articulation does not require practices such as prayer in school, this broader epistemological humility does not suggest that educators should cede authority to a particular faith tradition or regarding any particular issue such as regarding the often-cited example of climate science. The schools after all play an important role in initiating students into contemporary conceptions of the foundations on which truth claims legitimately rest. And while Taylor writes on language as a vehicle for meaning writ large, he has most elaborately applied his theory of language to human access to ethical understanding and to truth claims that are not demonstrable by scientific observation. In other words, educators will for good reason more naturally display humility regarding the limits of rational articulation when it comes to the nature of the good than on whether the climate is changing.

Yet acknowledging the limits of rational articulation while nonetheless teaching it can support the atmosphere of open-ended inquiry that liberalism formally encourages. Just as Taylor argues that substantive conceptions of the good based on religious faith need not be left entirely out of public discussion, students might be invited to discuss and explore their own conceptions of how people access truth and the good in discussions of complex issues. Educators might encourage students to examine these questions and claims in light of the reasoning that schools teach while acknowledging that not all questions can be answered through reason and its articulation alone. In other words, educators could continue to teach the language of reasoning that in the contemporary West is relied upon to legitimize meaning in public spaces, while finding subtle ways to honor that which may sit outside of and beyond such articulation.

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⁵³ Ergas, Oren. "The deeper teachings of mindfulness-based 'interventions' as a reconstruction of 'education'." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 49, no. 2 (2015): 203–220.